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The School Of Hard Cuts

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Almost all the big departments sent their people. State, Defense, Justice, Health and Human Services, Commerce, Energy and Interior were represented. So were the Army, the Air Force, the Marines, the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration and the Centers for Disease Control.

The Central Intelligence Agency sent five men and two women. "I can't tell you a thing," one of them whispered. "I don't want to get into trouble."

The governments of France, Norway and Japan sent emissaries. So did Boeing, Lockheed, Shell, RCA, the law firm of Arnold & Porter, the University of Chicago, the U.S. Catholic Conference and the city of Los Angeles, to name just a few.

And, this being Washington, the place was crowded with lobbyists, consultants and journalists.

What brought all these people together? A seminar, sponsored by Congressional Quarterly magazine, on the hottest topic of this Washington winter—the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced-budget act.

Everyone in town seems to be searching desperately for the inside skinny on what the law will do, when it will do it and who it will do it to.

"You have to remember the suddenness of this all. The law passed only six weeks ago, and it takes effect March 1," said Allen Schick, a University of Maryland professor who proposed the seminar idea to CQ and signed on as the principal speaker. "People are being told by their superiors to get up to speed. Everyone needs a crash course."

The participants' questions are pretty basic. "I want to find what the damn things means," said one of the need-to-knowers, Eugene Kopp of Union Pacific Corp.

"You can't start or stop a conversation in Washington without talking about Gramm-Rudman," said another, Steve Unglesbee, a lobbyist for Associated Builders and Contractors. "I came to learn the political outlook."

Unglesbee and about 675 others paid \$145 each to attend the CQ seminar. "The CIA people all paid cash," Schick said. "I saw them."

For their money, they received a red folder that contained the Nov. 23 edition of CQ magazine, several briefing papers on the law, 3½ hours of lectures, coffee and chocolate chip cookies.

Lyle Fowlkes, director of marketing research for CQ, which offers about 35 seminars a year on the workings of government, had originally booked a room that would hold 75 people.

But the first week CQ advertised the seminar, she said, "Our phone rang off the hook. We were getting 40 or 50 calls a day. People raised the roof when we tried to shut off registration."

One federal agency complained that it was being discriminated against when it found another agency had six slots at the seminar and it had only one. Two other agencies arranged for CQ to give private seminars but later canceled them, Fowlkes said. "They said they couldn't afford them under Gramm-Rudman."

To accommodate the crowd, CQ decided to hold two half-day seminars. It booked the ballroom at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on Capitol Hill, and enlisted as speakers Sen. Warren B. Rudman (R-N.H.), who was one of the authors of the law; Nell Payne, general counsel of the Senate Budget Committee; and Rep. Leon E. Panetta (D-Calif.), a longtime House budget expert.

Rudman said he was surprised by the interest in the law he once described as "a bad idea whose time has come."

"The press has done a very good job out of scaring the hell out of everybody," the senator said in an interview. "Everybody thinks Armageddon is coming. I'm not sure if Happy Valley is coming, but I don't think it is Armageddon either."

Rudman was right about the uneasiness. "Everyone is very nervous," said Roberta Youmans, who works for a law firm that specializes in low-income housing. "We want to be ready . . . We want to know what we should do next year."

"Gramm-Rudman is a milestone and will have a dramatic impact on the American way of life," Air Force Lt. Col. Mike Wyrick declared solemnly.

Wyrick was worried about money for Air Force doctors. Carol Barboro, a lawyer, was concerned about programs for American Indians. Ed Osann, who works for the National Wildlife Federation, said his group is studying whether to endorse a tax increase of some kind. Arne Thorvik, a diplomat from Norway, said he was worried about the ability of the

United States "to meet its international treaty obligations" under Gramm-Rudman-Hollings.

Washington is, of course, the information capital of the world. Information is supposed to be power here. So it isn't surprising that many at the CQ seminar were planning to recycle what they heard; recycled information is better than no information.

Several said they would write items in trade association newsletters; others talked about briefing co-workers. One woman said she planned to conduct a small seminar; a man said he hoped that what he had learned would help him get a new job.

All this suggests there is money to be made in this budget-cutting business. CQ's haul from its Gramm-Rudman-Hollings seminars should be more than \$97,875. It is also selling an audio cassette version of the show for \$55.

And Schick said he wished his lecture fee included a piece of the gate. "My kids always tell me I'm a good budget person, but a poor businessman," he said wistfully, running a hand through his bushy hair.